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THE DIVINITY OF CHRIST

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This is the fourth and final article of Professor Miller's series upon New Testament material dealing with Jesus. It moves farther into the region of theology than have the others, and for that reason may seem to move farther away from the New Testament itself. Yet even those who differ from some of the author's detailed positions will feel the constructive temper of his entire discussion. The interest in the subject of the person of Jesus is so great that we shall publish in the next issue of the BIBLICAL WORLD another paper on the same subject by Professor William Adams Brown. Both of these discussions lay repeated emphasis upon a vital evangelicalism, which is not a matter of doctrine, but of spiritual valuation and experience.

Christians are agreed on the divinity of Christ far more than the ebb and flow of theological terminology would indicate. If the truth were only realized, or admitted, many conservatives and liberals, who now think the gap between them wide and irreducible, would find themselves standing close together. The trouble is that many of the former insist on having the exaltation of Jesus expressed in their terms alone; otherwise, they deny that the exaltation is real or sufficient. On the other hand, many of the latter refuse to use language strong enough to express their true appreciation of Jesus, for fear they will be understood as subscribing to ideas they no longer hold. They deny themselves biblical phraseology which most aptly and beautifully expresses the fundamental agreement which may still exist between the views of a modern thinker and those of the historic church regarding Jesus Christ. The effect of this attitude may be unfortunate, but its motive is clear and praiseworthy. These men do not wish to fall into the unsteady arms of

compromise, for the compromiser is abroad in the land.

The New Phase of the Question

The status of the problem for many men has changed utterly. Science cannot dictate to us what our faith shall be, but it has established a method of procedure which must be followed in all historical investigation. And the problem of the divinity of Christ is, in the first instance, a historical problem. We must ascertain the historical facts by means of scientific, historical processes before we seek to pass judgment on the significance of the facts, else we are dealing with unknown quantities. Thus the old deductive method is gone forever. That is, we cannot begin with God and deduce therefrom the divinity of Jesus. God is the unknown, or partially unknown quantity that can be determined only by equations of historical fact, and these equations can be satisfied only by means of the historical method. I do not mean to say that we can prove the existence of God by means of the historical

method. Far from it. What I maintain is that any vital faith in God springs out of facts; that an educated man should consider the whole realm of historic fact in forming his conception of God; that, finally, such a consideration, to be valid, involves the use of the historical method. The problem may be put in this way: What sort of God, if any, do the facts of life lead us to believe in? Does the historical Jesus stand as *the gateway, par excellence*, to belief in such a God? If so, what should be our final estimate of Jesus?

The Teaching of the New Testament

The church has been right in emphasizing the person of Christ as the central fact of Christianity. In this it has but followed the example of the earliest disciples of Jesus. Perhaps I should use the word "personality," because "person" has acquired a meaning which is beyond my present thought. It was not Jesus the teacher, alone or chiefly, who won disciples. It was Jesus the person; Jesus the man. He lived a life that compelled a following and those Jews who followed him gave him the highest rank they could, next to God himself, namely, messiahship. To them he was *the* messenger of God, bringing light and life; subordinate to God, but second only to him. This is the messianic viewpoint, and in the Synoptic Gospels it is absolutely dominant.

At some time between this primitive period and the appearance of the Gospel of John, there arose the view of the person of Jesus so appealingly set forth in the beautiful stories of the infancy. We need not discuss here whether these narratives of Matthew and Luke arose before

or after the time of Paul, nor whether they were placed where they are by the evangelists themselves or by later editors. It satisfies our present purpose to remark that here we have a distinct attempt to account for Jesus' divine origin, this being already believed in on other grounds. We do not have to import myths in order to account for this phenomenon. The Hebrew ancestors of these Jewish Christians had often manifested a tendency to ascribe a supernatural birth to those whom they regarded as their great religious leaders, as in the cases of Isaac and of Samuel. A similar but, naturally, much stronger tendency gave rise, probably, to the accounts of Jesus' birth and infancy. The idea these stories embody is that of "physical filiation." They were creations of "popular devotion, destined to explain the divine sonship of Christ by his supernatural generation." This important product of popular theology eventually became a cardinal factor in the final shaping of the Christian creeds, in which it was amalgamated with various other elements—primitive Jewish-Christian, Pauline, Johannine, and others. That it was not such a factor in the first century is evident from the fact that it is ignored by Paul and the author of the Gospel of John. Indeed, such a theory as that of "physical filiation" is far from compatible with either of these other historic Christian viewpoints, namely, the Pauline and the Johannine.

Paul's Christian experience was of the transcendent type. Its conscious beginning was surrounded by abnormal conditions and the vision of Christ on the road to Damascus was ever the burn-

ing center of his religious and theological universe. Further, he cut himself off, in large part, from the details of Jesus' historical career which so determined the thought of his Jewish-Christian brothers. Hence it was but natural that the heavenly Christ should be the burden of his thought and that correspondingly lofty conceptions should appear in his writings. In his way he gave Jesus the first place. And yet he everywhere subordinates him to God, "even the Father" to whom "he shall deliver up the kingdom" at "the end."

What Paul did in his way, the author of the Fourth Gospel also did, but in a way peculiar to himself. Accustomed to the thought of the Philonic school, he exalted his Lord and Master in the terms that lay at hand. In so doing, he performed a great service for the thinking people of his day. Jesus was to him "the Word made flesh." This was understandable to a Greek and doubtless many were led to a proper estimate of Jesus through this way of describing him. The Philonic definitions of "the Word" are somewhat confusing. Sometimes "the Word" is spoken of as equal with God and sometimes in terms of subordination to him. It was really a term of mediation for a day when the gap between God and man was felt to be much greater than it is now felt to be or, as we may remark in passing, than Jesus evidently felt it to be. "The Word" was the highest of all divine intermediaries; the first step of God downward toward man. The author of the Fourth Gospel possessed a deep Christian experience together with an Alexandrian education and he could not find a better or more suitable name for his Master than this

term of mediation current in the Alexandrian school.

The Rise of the Creeds

Two centuries of conflict, conquest, and compromise passed over the Christian faith. Out of these things came the great creeds of Christendom. Christianity was enthroned upon the seat of power. No longer could it be said, "Not many wise, not many mighty, are called." Probably the great moving life of the religion was then, as always, down in the midst of the mass of common humanity, but the shaping of Christian polity and doctrine was no longer a naïve thing. It was in the hands of men skilled in politics. "Practical" men controlled these things and "practical" then meant just what it means now: a full recognition of the force of modifying circumstances. What were these modifying circumstances? They were the customs of the Greco-Roman world, its methods of organization, and its modes of thought. It is not pertinent to discuss here the details of the adaptation to environment which Christianity underwent, consciously and unconsciously, in the first three centuries of its history. I do not agree with those who hold that all this represented decay. On the contrary, it was inevitable, and it has had its place of value in the progress of mankind. Furthermore, as far as the creeds were concerned, it represented, at least in part, a sincere attempt to explain to the thinking people of the day how the God of the heavens had actually come into contact with a sorely needy humanity, through Christ. The creeds did for the time what now we see every age must do for itself anew; and, for my part, as

against the Arians, I think the truth then lay with the Athanasians.

But we have gone a long way upon the path of knowledge since the fourth century. We know more about the human mind and its subtle workings; more about the Bible and the way in which it was written; and, historically at least, more about Jesus of Nazareth and the circumstances surrounding him and his first disciples. This and other new knowledge has forever buried the Athanasian monuments in the sands of oblivion, removing them from the sight of a modern man who is seeking practical religious realities. Perhaps I should say that this ought to be the situation. As a matter of fact, a wrong conception of dogma has fastened the Athanasian viewpoint on the Christian church, as something infallible and unchangeable. Otherwise, we should not have even to refer to it here.

The problem of describing satisfactorily Jesus' relation to God and to the world is today, in many respects, an entirely different problem from that confronting the Church Fathers. In fact, much more recent phases of the problem are antiquated. The choice that is usually held out at present, of accepting historic Trinitarianism or of being classed as a Unitarian, is an incorrect way of presenting the issue. This false dilemma is due partly to mere polemic, partly to failure to understand the existing situation, and partly to the laziness or the legalism of minds which cannot get on without convenient categories which save time and effort. The issue today is simply between what is Christian and what is non-Christian. The choice lies between espousing the Christian view of

life and paying homage to some other view. And by espousing the Christian view of life I mean making effective in thought and in daily living Jesus' fundamental ideas of God, man, the world, and their interrelations; the ideas which we find controlling in his teaching and in his life. This practical, personal appropriation of the spirit of Jesus is, of course, the main problem for us all, but the mind is justified in seeking the implications involved and in asking further, "What think ye of Christ?" This is not merely a speculative task whose results are purely theoretical. A clear answer has practical value in that it clarifies many moral and religious questions.

The Incarnation and the Doctrine of Human Nature

The belief in the necessity, for salvation, of a complete incarnation of God in human form has been due to a prior belief, namely, that human nature is essentially and entirely corrupt. In early Christian thought, beginning at least as early as Paul, the evident evil in human life was joined with the biblical story of the fall of man. The theory of the complete corruption and perverseness of man was the result. On such a theory it was natural to think of God as bringing salvation to man solely through a miraculous incarnation. Thus arose the necessity, in the minds of the thinkers of that day, for regarding Jesus as the "God-Man," in the historic meaning of that term, namely, "God and man in one person forever."

That God is continually incarnating himself in human life, a religious man must surely hold; and the one differentiating mark of the Christian believer is

that he believes Jesus to have been the supreme incarnation of the God-life in man. As Sabatier says, "The Heavenly Father lives within the Son of Man, and the dogma of the God-Man, interpreted by the piety of each Christian, not by the subtle metaphysics of the doctors and the schools, becomes the central and distinguishing dogma of Christianity." But one difficulty with the position of historic Trinitarianism is that it fails to recognize the fundamental view of man revealed in the Synoptic Gospels—a view which is supported by modern psychology and by our everyday experience—namely, that human nature is not totally corrupt; that, as Jesus taught, all men are potentially "children of God"; that is, there is in man, by nature, a divine element to build on. Hebrew tradition expresses this same view in Gen. 1:26-27, where we read, "And God said, 'Let us make man in our image, after our likeness' . . . and God created man in his own image, in the image of God created he him." The story of the fall, whatever it may have meant to the ancient Hebrew, did not succeed in effacing from his mind this belief.

What is needed for salvation, then, is such an incarnation of the divine life in human form as to lead men to turn their backs on their lower, animal origin and turn their faces toward God and his will. Many leaders of mankind have performed this task measurably, but one may easily come to the conviction that Jesus has done it supremely and for all time. If one yields to him the practical lordship of life, salvation will inevitably follow. We may consider this salvation as sudden, when it involves a complete change of attitude, as is often the case—

conversion, in the root sense of the word. Or we may regard it as gradual, in that it means the steady and often long-drawn-out attempt to realize the Christian attitude in all the relationships of life. Again, we may regard it as present and this-worldly, in that it brings true satisfaction, joy, and achievement in this life. Finally, we may think of it as a future possession, or state of being after death. Under certain conditions the continuance of life after death would be intolerable. Can we conceive of its being "blessed" apart from a capacity to appreciate and appropriate the divine life revealed in Jesus? For such a salvation—and who would not concede its sufficiency?—it is not necessary to subscribe to the historic definition of the incarnation which the church has formulated and insisted upon. If one can say with Paul, "God was in Christ reconciling the world unto himself," as a true Christian must be able to say, he is in a position to secure all the religious and ethical benefits which Christianity in any form has ever been able to proffer.

We may cast bulwarks about this position, at this point, by reminding ourselves of Jesus' own teaching and also of the position of the earliest disciples. To my mind, Jesus clearly taught that he was the Messiah; and, to the first disciples, this was the true and final word by which to describe him. This term did not mean then what later Christian theologians, saturated with philosophic conceptions, considered it to mean. It meant merely that member of the Jewish race who was divinely "anointed" to introduce and head the "kingdom of God." Why may we not go back to the Synoptic Gospels and content ourselves

with the thought of Jesus as the introducer of the kingdom of God among men and its divine head? Then, freed from any compelling necessity regarding elaborate metaphysics and abstruse dogma, we may devote our whole energy to the supreme and eternally vital task of being introduced into the kingdom ourselves in order that we may "minister" to the many others who need the same introduction. Jesus was certainly not careful to insist on his complete infallibility in all departments of knowledge or of life, else he would never have said, "Why callest thou me good? None is good save one, even God"; nor would he have disclaimed knowledge of the exact time of the coming of the kingdom. The disciples, also, were not careful about such abstract considerations, else they would never have reported these sayings. A position sufficient for the Master himself, and for his first disciples, is surely sufficient for us; and if we go back to it, as we easily can, we shall be relieved of a great incubus and set free for the glorious, compelling, Christian task of making the real Christ-life dominant in the world.

God and the Holy Spirit

Another objection to the hitherto prevailing viewpoint is the distinction it seeks to establish between God and the Holy Spirit in the very attempt made to unite them. This is easily understandable when we consider the history of this phase of dogma. In the ancient world, especially in late Jewish thought and in the later developments of Platonism, God was conceived of as standing entirely apart from the world of men and of things, as far as his own direct activity

was concerned. He was the only holy one, superior to mundane matters in his awesome majesty; or a principle of truth and goodness that could not be brought into contact with human affairs except through some intermediary. Hence the idea of angels and other intermediary beings, or principles, like the Philonic "Word" which the Fourth Gospel adopts, to bring the God-life down to earth. Hence the separative conception of the Holy Spirit of God acting as a bearer of good from God to man.

There is much truth in all these conceptions. The Christian position as embodied in Jesus' teaching is theistic, certainly. That is, God is not man and man is not God. If there is to be any impartation of the spiritual God to a man potentially, but not actually, spiritual, it must come through channels that can effectively accomplish the transference of spiritual life. History leads us to believe that such impartation is direct from God to man; the actual Spirit, which is God himself, working directly upon the potential spirit, which is man; but also propagated from man to man by the impelling power of God *in* man. Thus any religious leader of mankind is an intermediary and Jesus may be considered the supreme intermediary—not only prophet and king, but also priest, if we care for historic terminology.

But a modern thinker, of any idealistic kind whatsoever, finds it hard, if he thinks about the matter at all, to differentiate between God and the Holy Spirit of God. God is not only "a spirit" but *the* Spirit, and where the Spirit of Holiness is, there is God. What is the reason for, or the value of, differentiating them and then bringing them together again

by means of a metaphysical formula which none can understand and which has no practical religious value that cannot be secured in another way? Whatever may be said for pluralistic views of the universe in general, nothing can be said for that sort of pluralism which practically says: "Let $x=v$ and $y=x$; then v and y are identical and yet distinct." This sort of thing may do very well on paper, but it does not touch real life. As a matter of fact, the general trend of our modern thought is toward the unity of the final reality underlying the world; and in so far as this trend is actual, just so far do these ancient distinctions between God the Father and God the Holy Spirit become difficult to maintain.

Here, again, it is a comfort and a support to return to Jesus' teaching and to the position of the first disciples. In the Gospel of John, to be sure, and in the Pauline epistles, the concept of the Holy Spirit is prominent, but it is far from being the metaphysical concept of later times. In the teaching of Jesus reported in the Synoptic Gospels, that is, up to the time of his death, the idea appears in the accounts of only four separate incidents. In two of these cases the parallel passages raise a possible question regarding the correctness of the record in this particular. The third case is a quotation from Isaiah, and in the fourth, the phrase used is "Spirit of your Father." Taking all four instances exactly as they stand, the most satisfactory interpretation is that here we have either the customary Jewish circumlocution to avoid the use of the divine name, or simply the old Hebraic use of the word "spirit." Certainly nothing could be farther from the evident meaning of

these passages than a metaphysical distinction between God and his Spirit. Everywhere else, and in numerous connections where we might expect to find the concept of the Holy Spirit introduced, Jesus consistently uses the word "Father" and emphasizes the direct and immediate contact between God and his children.

There are seven other occasions reported in the Synoptic Gospels in which we find the Holy Spirit mentioned. One is a citation from Isaiah and five of the others are manifestly of the Hebraic type already referred to. The seventh is the famous passage in Matt. 28:19, where the risen Jesus is reported as using the threefold formula "Father, Son, and Holy Spirit." Whatever one's view of its literary history, this particular verse does not belie the truth of the statement that the Synoptic Gospels are dominated by the messianic conception of Jesus and that the idea of the Holy Spirit is rarely found; also, when found, the idea does not warrant the metaphysical interpretation so often put upon it.

The Position of the Synoptic Gospels

In the teaching of Jesus, and in the Synoptic Gospels generally, God is thought of as the loving Father, so near that there is no need nor room for any intermediary between him and his children. He who *is* Spirit, *the* Spirit, is close at hand—God himself. With the disciples it was really a "duality," the Father and the Son. As a matter of fact, the Pauline and the Johannine conceptions of the Spirit, mentioned in connection with God the Father, and Jesus the Son, are far removed from the fourth-century conception. They are really

only practical working definitions, describing in terms of actual Christian experience the way in which God works in the world. This is also true of the threefold formula of Matt. 28:19, referred to above. Undoubtedly, however, in all these instances the thought is beginning to tend away from the simple, practical significance of the Hebraic and dominant synoptic emphasis.

In spite of these strictures, my sympathies are with historic Trinitarianism rather than with Unitarianism. Certainly any sympathetic religious man who is not a bigot would respond to the general attitude taken by such great Unitarian leaders as Channing and Martineau, but, generally speaking, Unitarianism has interested itself too largely in pointing to the negative side of the question. In insisting, in season and out of season, that Jesus was "a mere man" it has failed, along with many of its opponents also, to recognize the fact that no man is "a mere man," according to genuine Christian teaching. Much less can it be said of such a one as Jesus that he was "a mere man."

This point has already been referred to, but it must be insisted upon because the chief root of present misunderstanding is here. Both extreme conservatives and extreme radicals base their position on the old and mistaken view that human nature is totally different and disconnected from the divine nature. I have pointed out that this view does not accord with ancient Hebrew thought nor with the teaching of Jesus. Neither does it accord with the results of modern psychology. It sprang out of late Jewish and late Platonic developments, through both of which it effected an entrance into

Christian thought and became controlling. So long as it persists, so long will men who ought to be together remain separated, because the particular way in which the divinity of Christ is conceived of depends upon this prior position. If there is an absolute gap between human nature and the divine, then the divinity of Christ will be conceived of as a complete, miraculous incarnation, and the tendency will be to run the whole gamut of external authority, infallibility, and miraculous proof. If human nature is recognized as potentially divine, the divinity of Christ will be thought of as such an impartation of divine life, in the realm of the ethical and the religious, as will infallibly draw men to God, if Jesus be truly given the pre-eminence. Thus men's hearts will be turned away from sin and they will be led in the ways of righteousness.

Constructive Value of the Doctrine of the Divinity of Christ

Let me gather together, in conclusion, the positive, constructive elements in the position here taken, lest their full force be diminished through the piecemeal statement necessitated by the previous inevitable argument. Most people inherit their religion with the color of their hair and either do not question it at all or do not, cannot, question fairly. Even those who have been forced to question most, in formulating their religious views, are controlled far more by practical tendencies than by purely intellectual consideration. This is as it should be and as it has ever been. For most of us an intellectual statement is only a buttress for, or a clarification of, a faith already more or less spontaneously ap-

propriated. Still, we may be helped by such a statement because our minds demand it. Religion cannot do without dogma. If a body of religionists should unite on the simple basis of their belief in God, the universal Father, that basis would be a dogmatic basis. What is needed is not the elimination of dogma but its simplification, and also a provision for its continual revivification through the adaptation of its statement to advancing knowledge. Let us, therefore, for entirely practical reasons, put forth an account of the intellectual process by which a modern man, with full recognition of the results of science and of historical criticism, may defend his faith in the divinity of Jesus.

We have a life to live in the midst of a world that is partly, but only partly, intelligible to us. In order to live that life most effectively it is necessary to have some conviction regarding the why of it all, the whence and the whither of things. The facts of existence give us clues which we may follow up far enough to establish reasonable hypotheses, or faiths, by means of which we can govern our action, holding fast the more firmly as experience justifies our faith; discarding or modifying as experience compels us thus to change. One is at liberty, of course, to interpret the universe in terms of the lowest of its elements, provided one is willing to pay the penalty. So, one may fix his faith in atoms, become a materialist, and consider all spiritual forms of life as illusory. It would seem more reasonable, however, to believe that the ultimate nature of an organism is that revealed by its highest manifestations; that which it is capable of producing at its best. If this is true of

plants and animals, may we not reasonably assume it to be true of the universe of things, plants, animals, and men? One may easily say that one thinks a stone is as good as a man, but "actions speak louder than words," and therefore we do not have to argue the position that there is an ascending scale of being in the universe from the inanimate, through the merely animate, to the consciousness of man.

Current observation and the study of history both may lead us to the conclusion that, in man, it is not merely intellectual acumen which is significant, but also, still more, what we call character and spiritual appreciation, because the latter, far more than the former, have to do with the direction and employment of man's abilities and with his destiny. Among the various exponents of competing types of character and spiritual appreciation stands Jesus of Nazareth, not merely as a teacher of what is known as the Christian life, but also as a living exemplar of it. It was never easier than now to come to the conclusion that in Jesus—not in his teaching merely, but in himself, in his person—we have the highest personal manifestation of spiritual life that the world has yet seen. This conclusion may be reached not only through the direct response the life of Jesus calls forth, but also by considering the age-long and ever-increasing command it has exercised over the hearts of men—a command which, in these latter days even more than at earlier times, is overleaping geographical, political, and racial boundaries and is exerting its benign influence on man as man.

What can we say, then, about a universe which has produced this wonderful

phenomenon? What must we say? Are not we justified in holding that the essential nature of the organism is best revealed in this, its finest flower? Are we not compelled to say that such things are not due to chance? If not chance, then what? At this point should we not bend the knee and recognize our God? And must it not be that such a God is essentially of the same spirit and purpose as the life through which we come to a belief in him? In other words, must not our God be like Jesus of Nazareth? He cannot be inferior to him and remain God; nor can we easily imagine a quality of life superior to that of Jesus. Thus the usual form of the problem is reversed. The modern question is not, "Is Jesus like God?" but rather, "Is there a God of the same quality of life as that possessed by Jesus?" God is the x , the unknown quantity which we are seeking to determine, and it seems most reasonable to hold that Jesus is the known factor

through which we are enabled to solve the problem.

If all this is true, or in general accordance with the truth, then we are ready to use with intelligence, discrimination, and yet with whole-hearted self-commitment, many of the time-worn terms that have been hallowed by Christian usage. Especially may it be said that the language of the New Testament serves to express fittingly our proper appreciation of, and our attitude toward, Jesus of Nazareth. We may call him Messiah, the Christ, the Son of God, the Revealer, the Savior, Lord, and Master. In his varied functions he will be to us Prophet, Priest, and King. Nothing will be too high or too lofty to express our faith in him, our trustful attitude toward him, or our recognition of his supreme and final place in the drama of life portrayed before our half-blind eyes upon the wondrous stage of God's great universe.

A CORRECTION

In the article by Professor William Adams Brown in the April number of the *Biblical World*, p. 230, lines 32 and 33, there was an error due to the failure to make corrections which Professor Brown had marked in the galley proof of his article. The sentence reads:

"We are trying not to save individual drunkards and prostitutes but simply to create," etc. It should read: "We are trying not simply to save individual drunkards and prostitutes but to create such a social order," etc.